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SUBJECT: STILL PURSUING THE AMERICAN DREAM: AN UPDATE ON TIJUANA'S MIGRANT COMMUNITY

REF: 2008 TIJUANA 698

SUMMARY

Despite a weakening U.S. economy and increased border patrols, officials and volunteers who work with the migrant community in Tijuana have not witnessed a slowdown in clientele. The number of recent deportees, almost none of them originally from Tijuana, present in Tijuana's shelters continues to rise. Most deportees will try to return to the U.S. Rescues of migrants trapped in precarious situations has increased, particularly near Tecate where some migrants and their "polleros", or paid guides, are attempting the journey through the mountains to avoid the border fence being constructed to the west. Migrants seem determined to pursue the American dream, despite the risks, and their often difficult lives. END SUMMARY.

LOTS OF DEPORTEES

¶2. As reported in reftel, Tijuana is a stopover for migrants, both those arriving from other parts of Mexico to attempt the journey north and those recently deported from the U.S. The more difficult economic circumstances in the U.S. and tougher border crossing (with a higher price tag) has not yet diminished the number of migrants in the border area, mostly due to the increased number of deportees. The Casa de Migrante, the largest shelter in the Tijuana area, for example, housed 11,437 migrants in 2008 versus 9,549 in 2007. Father Luis Kendziernski, director of the Casa de Migrante, points out that this increase of about twenty percent roughly reflects the increase in the number of persons deported through California/Baja California's ports in 2008 (265,054 in 2008 versus 213,056 in 2007). Father Kendziernski says about seventy percent of his clients are deportees and only thirty percent are recent arrivals from southern Mexico trying to make the journey north for the first time. This represents a reversal from two to three years ago, when the number of recent arrivals from the south formed the majority of the shelters' clients. However, it is notable that, while the weakening U.S. economy is clearly discouraging many, a trickle of would-be immigrants from other Mexican states are still showing up in Tijuana's shelters.

¶3. Moreover, tougher economic conditions and a more difficult journey for migrants do not appear to be discouraging deportees from attempting to return. Father Kendziernski says a third of the deportees will try the journey again right away - probably because they have no choice if their wife and kids are still in the U.S. Also, many of the deportees report having spent a good part of their life in the U.S. (up to fifteen to twenty years in some cases), so have built up strong networks and made their lives in the U.S. and have no desire to live in Mexico. He says that others initially claim they will stay to live in Mexico, but he believes this is a temporary, impulsive reaction to being deported and that, after six to eight months of trying to make a living in the even tougher conditions in Mexico, the overwhelming majority try the journey again. Those that stay in Tijuana temporarily can usually eke out a living, but life is difficult as most have little money (cash they had on them when caught for deportation is returned by Border Patrol in the form of a U.S. check, which migrants cannot cash in Mexico), lack paperwork necessary for a formal sector job, and do not have

family in the area. Only a small percentage return to their home states permanently.

RECESSION-PROOF JOB: POLLERO

¶4. All this means that sketchy "polleros", or guides, benefit the most by having a continuing supply of repeat customers, and migrants continue to be subject to harsh conditions and exploitation. Grupo Beta, a rescue group that is part of the GOM's National Migration Institute, does daily patrols in the four main migrant corridors between the Pacific Coast and the area east of Tijuana. The Group says some migrants simply do not heed their warnings about harsh weather conditions, probably because they know of people who have made the trip successfully. The Group records an increasing number of rescues in the mountainous areas near Tecate, where "polleros" are trying to avoid the border fence being built in from the coast. Some still attempt to cross through the border fence (a number of patch repairs by Border Patrol are already visible), but the risk of getting caught is much higher in this one-day journey than the three- to four-day trip through the deserts or mountains to the east. In addition to weather, migrants also face the potential of attacks by armed bandits. Father Kendziernski says it's hard to know how prevalent this problem is: some migrants report seeing nobody during their journey, others report problems. Grupo Beta believes this problem has existed for years and will not go away.

¶5. COMMENT: Despite expectations that immigration through Tijuana to the U.S. would halt, due to a continuing supply of recent deportees anxious to return to the U.S. and a still existent, if diminished, trickle of ambitious would-be immigrants from the south, neither shelter workers nor Grupo Beta expect a significant decrease in the number of Mexicans needing their assistance in the medium term.

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